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FROM ÆSOP TO MARK TWAIN

It was pointed out not long ago that Mark Twain had paralleled in an episode in his *Tom Sawyer Abroad* a passage in Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*; and later it was shown that the passage in Sir Thomas Browne came originally from one of the Apocryphal books of the *Maccabees*. There is another of Mark Twain's narratives which finds a parallel in an ancient story, and, if I am not greatly mistaken, finds in this ancient parallel its ultimate source. This is his child's story, *A Dog's Tale*, published a half-dozen years ago in *Harper's Monthly*; and its source is, if my theory be correct, nothing other than the famous story of *The Dog and the Snake*, or, as it is perhaps more familiarly known, in its Welsh variant, the tale of *Llewellyn and his Dog*.

The tale of *Llewellyn and his Dog* is one of the most ancient and reputable of all the popular stories that have come down to us. It had its origin in India some five hundred years before Christ, so the orientalist assure us; and it is preserved in upwards of twenty-five different versions, representing every language of Europe and a good half of the languages of Asia. A family tree might be made out for it well-nigh as imposing as that of "Cinderella and her Slippers."

In English the tale is best known in the Welsh version that I have mentioned, in which it is associated with a traditional Nimrod of South Wales, Llewellyn by name, and the dog is called Gellert. This version, I may interject, has been twice put into verse,—first, in 1900, by W. R. Spencer, in his *Beth Gelert, or the Grave of the Greyhound*, and more recently, in a diluted form, by the Georgia poet, F. O. Ticknor, in his poem entitled *Gelert*. The story also occurs in the *Æsop* of Sir Roger L'Estrange, published at London in 1692; in the Middle English redactions of *The Seven Sages of Rome* and the *Gesta Romanorum*, two famous mediæval story collections; and in an Irish fairy-tale, which has assumed some five or six different forms. It has also found its way, in a simplified version, into several of our school readers.

The briefest of all these variants is the fable version of Sir Roger L'Estrange: and it must accordingly do service for quotation here,—though it should be noted that Sir Roger takes some liberties with his story, compressing it unduly and inverting the order of its incidents. Being after the moral first and foremost, he really begins near the end of his story, leaving the earlier incidents to be told in conclusion by way of retrospect. But he holds on to the main elements of his original; and he atones in part for the liberties that he takes by heightening just a little his style, which in most other versions is as bald and colorless as a page out of a college catalogue. This is the tale as he tells it:—

“The Master of a Family that had, as he thought, a very good Condition'd Dog; coming home from his Bus'ness once, found a Cradle Overturnd; the Dog's Mouth all Bloody, and his only Child missing. He draws his Sword immediately and kills the Dog, upon a Presumption that he had Worryed the Child; without any regard to his Try'd Fidelity, and without allowing himself One Moment of Time for a Second Thought. Upon a further Enquiry, he found the Truth of the Matter to be this: The Child being left alone in the Cradle, there was a Serpent Winding it self up the Side on't, to Destroy the Child. The Dog leaps upon the Serpent, and Tears it to Pieces; but in the Scuffle, the Cradle happen'd to be Overturnd: Upon the taking up of the Cradle, the Master found the *Child* Alive under it, and the Serpent Dead, which upon Reflexion, Convinc'd him of the Miserable Temerity of the Mistake.”

Such is the story—or, at least, a fairly representative form of the story—which I believe supplied Mark Twain with the hint for *A Dog's Tale*. Comparison of the two stories, while bringing out, I need scarcely say, numerous divergences between them, also demonstrates their essential identity. In reconstructing his original, Mark Twain created for it an entirely new background, laying the scene of the action in a modern home—a new England home, we may guess,—and filling in with a good many particulars of his own; moreover, he rounds out the story with an incident which is, likewise, entirely his own, the account of the death of the faithful dog's only puppy. The

main incident of his story, however—the rescue of a little child from danger through the bravery of a pet dog—is essentially the same as that of Sir Roger's fable, though the child is saved in the American version, not from the attack of a snake, but from the danger of death by fire. Both stories, furthermore, possess the motive of the father's ingratitude to the faithful dog; and both make it appear that it was by reason of the absence of the nurse—a feature pretty constant in the earlier versions, but omitted by Sir Roger—that the child's life came to be endangered. The change in the central incident was necessitated by the change made in the setting; the other departures from the original story evidently grew out of Mark Twain's desire to modernize and to humanize the story and to make it indisputably his own, in which, it goes without saying, he succeeded beyond any question.

But even more interesting than the recrudescence of our story in this episode of Mark Twain's is the history of the story in the twenty-odd centuries of its prior existence. I have already said that the tale originated, in all probability, in India some five centuries before Christ. This falls in pretty well with the date that Mr. Joseph Jacobs has proposed for the *floruit* of the traditional inventor of the beast fable, Æsop the slave. And it is possible, of course, that Æsop had heard the story, but the number of fables that can safely be assigned to him is less than half a dozen, and this is not one of them. It was, however, taken up into one of the early Æsopic collections, that of Baldo, more than seven centuries ago, and, later, as we have seen, it was admitted into the collection of Sir Roger L'Estrange; so that it has as fair a claim upon any Æsopic paternity as have most of the stories that go under the fabulist's name.

But the name of the actual inventor of the story is not known. It seems probable, indeed, that the tale first existed in oral form, and that it was not reduced to writing until about the second century before Christ, when it was given its first literary shaping by certain Buddhic pundits, compilers of an ancient book, known as the *Pantschatantra*. The earliest draft of this work has been lost, but the copy of it that has survived is believed to approximate pretty closely the original. From

India the story passed into Arabia, and then — probably by way of Palestine — into Greece, where, according to Pausanias, the Greek geographer, it was current among the inhabitants of Phocis in the second century of our era. From Greece — or, it may be from Palestine — it next made its way into the Occident; but just when or how, it is impossible to tell; only we know that it flourished there in oral accounts as early as the twelfth century. To this century belong both the Æsopic version of Baldo, which follows the Oriental tradition, and the freer version found in *The Seven Sages of Rome*, from which it is likely that most of the Occidental versions descended. In the thirteenth century, according to Etienne de Bourbon, the tale had already become traditional in the French province of Lyons, where the faithful dog had been canonized, being worshipped under the name of St. Guinefort. About the same time, probably, it came to be told as one of the *fabliaux*, and also made its way into the *Gesta Romanorum*. Later, it appeared in two German story-collections, and as one of the *novelle* of Sansovino; and modern versions in both French and Russian have been pointed out in recent years. The English versions I have already mentioned. To their number may also be added a pictorial representation of one stage of the story said to be preserved on one of the crests of Wales dating from the time of Richard III.

The most important of the Oriental versions is that contained in the *Pantschatantra*. Other important variants are to be found in the so-called *Book of Sindibad*, the *Fables of Bidpai*, the *Kathasaritsagara*, the *Hitopadesha*, the *Alakesha Katha*, the ancient Chinese story-book known as the *Vinaya Pitaka*, and in a half-dozen other collections with equally unpronounceable names.

And it is just possible that we also have a variant of the Eastern form of the story in one of Mr. Kipling's tales, his fine boys' story, *Rikki-tikki-tavi*, of the second *Jungle Book*.¹ Between this tale and the typical Oriental version there are several

¹ I am indebted for the suggestion of this possible variant to my colleague, Mr. C. R. Baskervill.

interesting points of similarity. In both, to state the case shortly, there is a pet mongoose (substituted for the dog in most of the Oriental variants); in both there is a cobra; and in both the mongoose saves the life of a little child by killing the cobra. But if Mr. Kipling did actually make use of our story—there is a Punjab version of it, published a quarter of a century ago, which he may have read, or he might have heard the story from the natives, among whom it is said to be current still—he has recast his original even more radically than did his distinguished American contemporary, and, like him, he has also supplied it with sundry trimmings of his own.

In its many wanderings, the story has naturally undergone divers transformations besides those that I have mentioned. In the Welsh version, for instance, the attacking animal is a wolf. In the Irish version, the scene of the story is the castle of a king, the protecting animal is a werewolf, and the hostile creature is a hobgoblin. And in a Latin variant of the same version, the story is associated with no less a person than the good King Arthur, the werewolf being the brother of the king. In the Pausanias version, by an interesting reversal of conditions, a snake appears as the protecting animal, the hostile animal being a wolf, as in the Welsh version. The child had been hidden away by its father in an earthen vessel in the depths of a forest, where the wolf discovers it, and is about to devour it, when the snake appears and coils itself about the mouth of the vessel, and saves its life; the father, coming into the forest after a while, finds the snake still coiled about the vessel, and, supposing that it has killed the child, casts his javelin at it and kills both snake and child. Another apparent variant of the story, and one that has been pointed out but recently, is preserved in a modern French tradition. According to this, a merchant was once riding along a highway when his money-bags slipped from the saddle. He did not notice his loss, but his dog did, and tried to attract his attention to it by barking and by snapping at his horse's ears. The merchant, concluding that the dog was mad, drew his pistol and shot him. Later he discovered his loss, and, going back, found the body of the dog lying on the bags. In the Oriental versions, which

are, as a rule, briefer than the European versions, the snake is a constant quantity, but the part played by the dog is taken either by a mongoose, an ichneumon, a weasel, or a cat. In one version, however, a wolf takes the place of the dog and the hostile animal is a tiger.

To trace the pedigree of the story with much of exactness, I may say by way of concluding my account, is quite out of the question—though it has been said that it may be traced “with the utmost precision.”² But this is manifestly impossible, for the simple reason that most of the versions intervening between even the more closely related forms have been lost,—and for the further reason that the connecting links between successive versions were, as often as not, oral rather than literary. There are, to be sure, some relationships that can be confidently traced; we can be certain, for instance, that the Oriental versions all originated in the *Pantschatantra*, that the *Æsop* of Baldo descended from the *Fables of Bidpai*, that the version in the *Gesta Romanorum* was derived from *The Seven Sages*, and that Mr. Kipling's version of the tale—if, indeed, it may be counted among the variants—was based on some Oriental form of it. Beyond this, though, we can scarcely go, but are thrown back upon conjecture.

And even conjecture is baffled in some cases,—as in the case of the version of Pausanias, current in Greece five hundred years after the story was first written down in India, yet bearing less resemblance to the Oriental tale than do most of the Occidental versions of a thousand years later. Difficult it is, also, to account for the Irish variant in which the werewolf and the hobgoblin figure. And equally puzzling it must be to explain the exact derivation of *A Dog's Tale*. It is clear that Mark Twain took no hint from Mr. Kipling; it is clear enough that he owed nothing to any of the Oriental versions. It is just as

² See Mr. S. Baring-Gould's essay on the subject in his *Curious Myths of the Middle Ages*, p. 134 f., London, 1901. The history of the story has also been discussed by Professor G. L. Kittredge in his *Arthur and Gorlagon*, pp. 269 f. and *passim*; by Mr. J. G. Frazer in his edition of Pausanias, V, p. 421 f.; by Mr. W. A. Clouston in his *Popular Tales and Fictions*, II, p. 166 f.; and by myself, from the point of view of the *Seven Sages*, in my edition of *The Seven Sages of Rome*, p. lxxviii f.

clear that he did not find his materials in the hobgoblin were-wolf variant; and we can be sure also that he did not go to Baldo, or to the *novella* of Sansovino. He may have known the version of Sir Roger L'Estrange, though I think that unlikely. It is possible that he had heard the Gellert story on some excursion into Wales; for the Welsh are fond of the story, and have localized it at their village of Bedd Gellert, where they exhibit to this day a mound which they aver is the grave of the faithful dog. Or, again—and this is not the least likely of all the conjectures that I have to offer—he might perhaps have heard the story from some little child who had been told it by his teacher or had met with it in his reading-book. Or, finally, it is possible, I think, that Mark Twain was not conscious of any acquaintance whatsoever with the ancient story, that it was with him a case of “unconscious assimilation,” as we say in explaining verbal similarities between poets. But that the two stories are ultimately one and the same we may, I think, be reasonably sure.

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